

POLISH EXPLORATIONS ACROSS ASIAN BORDERS
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[Editor's Note: Exploration is almost a foreign concept today, but it wasn't that long ago that scientists were traveling to all corners of the world in search of new species. Tomasz brings us vignettes of explorations from Polish science that are often unfamiliar to English-reading audiences. It is a good reminder that there may be interesting tales of unfamiliar creatures yet to uncover in journals of explorers from non-English-speaking nations.]

Exploration is humanity tempted towards the unknown. It is extensive analysis targeted to searching out unrecognized aspects to the mind's information. We of course know plenty of regions that are outside of full human knowledge, the existence of areas unexplored. Fauna of these areas are known as shadows of existence. Many gardens and valleys in Central Asia are among the forgotten temperate regions, especially concerning natural history studies. There are plenty of habitats not yet seen by civilized humans.

This region and surrounding areas are a place of unfolding spectacle that about a hundred year ago included exploration by Europeans, who were interested in geography and faunal and floral collections. (One explorer mentioned in his monumental work *Susymara*, the source of the Central Asian river Syr Darya in a *pamir*, or high, grassed, non-forested plateau.) There were many out-of-the-way regions that mostly remain intact to the present

day. There are also places affected by human strife and those which have been forgotten. These explorations tested the borders of human endurance as well.

RECORDS FROM EXTENSIVE REGIONS AND HUNTER REPORTS

I am aware of the weakness of eyewitnesses to exaggerate creatures, both freshwater and terrestrial, though some stories do not appear to be solely human inventions. Creatures known by natives come from nature, but are inseparable from their beliefs and cultural knowledge, as well as the human tendency to create fiction. Central Asian regions are inhabited by groups known in Polish as "Krajowcy". These are tribal people, many of them highlanders living at present under primitive conditions. First are the Uyghurs. They possessed knowledge on animals not yet identified by zoologists. Their land is now within the People's Republic of China in the area known as the Tarim Basin, mostly occupied by the great sand desert, Taklamahan (or Taklamakan). In ancient times there were fertile lands with crops and plantations of old trees, but the lands were forgotten and believed to be a place of rare animal and plant diversity. Some species bordering on extinction remained through the last centuries and may living there now inside unexplored valleys. On the southern slopes of Perijoch-Tau, explorer Bronislaw Grabczewski found plenty of grasslands where nomads wandered from Bokhara. Wild animals lived there with no fear of humans, due to lack of humans during the wintertime there. Mulberry orchards surrounded Wachji villages and the Darwaz mountains.

A few times, explorer Bronislaw Grabczewski met mountain tribes, Toglics. These highlanders were sheepherders. These tribes spoken the Kashgarian language with Jerkend dialect. During his explorations, Grabczewski met Hunze people in Kandzhut in southern Pamir, an area covered by western Karakorum. Finally, he sought an isolated ethnic group known as Kalasha, a peaceful, Caucasian group with its own culture, different from surrounding inhabitants. This ancient indigenous population live now in a Hindu Kush land locally known as Kafiristan, the "Land of the

Non-Believers.” Actually, the Kalasha people possess various haplotypes within. In the region of the north exist other not-so-clearly classified populations related to Kalasha. One problem of the conservation paradigm is to save the naturally-living Kalasha peoples and their culture. Humans (*Homo sapiens*) are diverse, migrating in the past a few times in various directions. Plenty of other ethnic groups are now fragmented in space. The main task is conservation of the distinct cultures of local human populations.

Records of encounters with uncommon animals were provided by this Polish explorer. He fought with Caspian tigers and met one persistent Russian tiger hunter. Grabczewski observed great herds of wild bovids, or yaks, in the north of the Raskem desert. He hunted large red antelopes in Hindu Kush that are called by the native people *Jurga*. It seems to have been one of the rarest creatures of that region. I suppose *Jurga* could be a folk name for the local markhor (*Capra falconeri ssp.*), currently an endangered species, though this is uncertain. Grabczewski reported also three kinds of bear in the Pamir region (supposedly known in Tibet as the Yeti). These were “*Ursus isabellinus*,” a primitive kind of brown bear, “*Ursus leuconyx*,” a brown bear originated from Tien Shan, and the “Tibetan bear” or Asiatic black bear. These creatures, I think, are different ursid populations. The explorer noted bear tracks that reminded him greatly of human tracks, except they were larger. Interestingly, his expedition encountered one bear in the far mountains that at first was mistakenly identified as a human, before it muttered and shook his head.

Another time, the expedition shot a great caprid, or *Nahur*, at the foot of Himalayas near Ming-teke creek. Grabczewski killed a great *Hystrix* porcupine in Gunta Valley, Tajikistan, on 3567 m.a.s.l., a place where it was not previously recorded. They reported a hare “*Lepus lachmani*,” a small abundant creature, near Chargusz Pass 4344 m.a.s.l. I think that it is nothing more than one of the pikas. Grabczewski recorded raptors and other birds of various kinds. He mentioned white-meat chukar, or mountain partridge (*Caccabis chuckar*). Rarely seen were great bustards (*Otis tarda*), birds that were “flying as aeroplanes.” It seems to be that

he means as large as an aeroplane, because Grabczewski knew that bustards in these regions were believed to be the largest flying bird. It seems that some specimens could be really large as some stories were provided by the author. One bustard was wounded by a hunter and was not able to fly, but it proved to be quite a fast runner. Grabczewski chased the bird and killed it finally. The bustard was huge, fat, and weighed about 30 pounds. I believe that *aeroplane* is a bit overestimated, but in flight larger specimens can look quite big. Regarding other avifauna there were crows with red heads ("*Freligus graculus*," probably red-billed chough) in the Karategin region (Tajik areas).

In the mountains of Khujand near the Syr Darya rim, the author was warned about a great fish ("*Silurus*"), that took a swimming soldier. It is no surprise that the Polish military did not believe natives in previous reports of aggressive catfish toward bathing people. This case showed that an animal resembling a huge fish actually existed. Big lake Kara-Kul is associated with various tales about explorers who spent the night on the lake and were grabbed by a "monster" living in the deep. The "dragon" could be some big fish (e.g. wels catfish *Silurus glanis*) or another aquatic animal undescribed.

Fish were not used by some ethnic groups. Kyrgyz people did not recognize fish species (calling them all *balyk*), as they did not catch these creatures. Kyrgyz people believed that fish meat, especially the head of trout, is deadly. In opposite to them, Sarts of Fergana knew two forms of trout: *sultan* and *maryn*.

Grabczewski was legendary among Turkestan peoples, known as *Uzun-ajak-tiura*, which means leggy. This was related to his riding English style on horseback. During one of the trips, the Kyrgyz Bek called him the prevaricator. According to their legend, Grabczewski rode on two camels. He sat on one, and on the second one he put his legs, that carried over the front. It explains very clearly the way in which indigenous peoples are able to assign a description and name to entities normal or uncommon.

"We are moving forward with extraordinary difficulties," testified the explorer. It was through regions not yet observed before.

We know that such regions are places where cryptozoological animals are sought as well. The story of Grabczewski shares many distinct memories of travels with the military service of the Imperial forces, through hazardous meetings with native peoples and treacherous mountains and passes. It is a story of astonishing efforts.

REMINESCENCES IN EXPLORING THE NATURAL WORLD

Going Deep into Siberian Zoology and Baikal Biodiversity

Throughout this early time there was plenty of researchers going deep into Siberian lands. It was a time for explorations. One of the political exiles was faunal investigator Benedikt Dybowski who set off to these large spaces with only his own perseverance and knowledge. He was not discouraged by adversity and embarked on a long journey. This researcher was the cofounder of limnology. His anthropological, ethnographical, and natural history research filled museums. He was not only able to work past exhaustion but returned to his country as a prominent zoological explorer from parts of the world that were almost unstudied before. He was responsible for providing data on the Ainu peoples of Sachalin (or Sakhalin). The Ainu people were called a primitive, mystery tribe of hairy humans with red-brown hair. They lived in huts of brushwood. Anthropologists saw a connection between them and “pre-human” (“the others”). They celebrated the bear feast, as Neanderthals/Denisovans did. Modern genetics confirm their uniqueness, as they are more closely related to Australasians than to other Caucasians, and possess in their genes Denisovan ancestry, although their primitiveness or hairy bodies is simply folklore.

He sacrificed much for science. As a zoologist, he described the biodiversity of Lake Baikal fauna, discovering plenty of unrecognized invertebrates, such as gastrotrichs, mollusks, crustaceans, and arachnids. One of those described by him was a black daphnia that was quite different from its European counterparts. *Comphorus baikalensis*, an oilfish, was studied intensively by him. Countering previous views, he discovered that this kind of fish was viviparous. He authored a monograph, “On the Baikal phoca (*Phoca baikalensis*)” about the Lake Baikal seal. One of his most exciting

trips was in the “Pachabiczka” river where he shot a wolverine, *Gulo gulo*, a bloodthirsty creature thought to attack large ruminants, such as cows or moose. During a three-week expedition to Chamar-Daban in the Taiga, they encountered mystery riders, that turned out to be a Chekanowski troop. In the Chamar-Daban mountains researchers confirmed the diversity of pikas, though the area lacked any other charismatic fauna. Furthermore, they explored other areas. During a trip from Czyta to Darasun they stayed in a haunted house. Dybowski and his assistants extensively studied wildlife in a region known as the Dauria steppes, where researchers collected plenty of bird and mammal skins.

They travelled further east towards Amur, in regions where the Arguni river bordered Chinese lands. They lived primitively in folding tents, spending evenings near campfires and eating what nature yielded them. In Ussuri country they described another ruminant. Except for a few contributions in forms of letters about Siberian and Kamtchatkan mammals, Dybowski authored few monographs on those vertebrates, but published a checklist of mammal fauna from Yenisey to the Pacific coast. He collected with unusual ferocity the birds in the Kultuk territory. He searched on the coasts for a complete skeleton of the Steller's sea cow, but found only fragments of that extinct “lazy and greasy beast.” On Bering Island he collected ethnodata on that sirenian. According to some reports this creature was extant until the 1830s. Dybowski spent much of his time in Kamtchatka doctoring leprosy.

Best informed of the Zarewszan region and Bukhara

Leon Barszczewski resided in Samarkanda and tried to study extensively other lands that waited discovery. Leon showed a passion for the natural world from childhood. He never wavered in his engagement to explore the mysterious in nature. He joined the Russian Imperial army. Well known is his demarcation of the borders of Imperial Russia with Chinese and Afghan borders. Barszczewski's main task as an officer was researching the area and laying out new roads. He published works in Central Asiatic glaciology as well. During one of his expedition he and his horse tumbled

into an abyss, where he lost a few teeth and was forced into long convalescence. We still have today plenty of his photographs of locals and landscapes along those mountain routes.

He was deeply interested in the life of local natives. Sometimes with humor he demonstrated his magical tricks. As he wrote, "My continuous life with 'wild' humans showed I had falsely judged them. I couldn't find any so-called bestiality in these half-wild inhabitants. I endeared myself among them gaining many wonderful friends." He discovered the ancient city, Samarkanda. He participated in more than twenty expeditions. P. Siemionow called him "the most tireless and enthusiastic explorer of the mountainous areas of Turkestan." Natural deposits of minerals, precious stones, asbestos, coal and so on was sought during these expeditions. Great flora and fauna collections were deposited in Moscow and Petersburg. He didn't want to become Orthodox, so because of his refusal, he was expelled. But he returned yet again to Asia as a member of expedition to searching for the monolith of the sarcophagus of Alexander III.

From the Causasian memories

One day, Ludwik Młokosiewicz encountered a Russian Army Caucasian regiment which initiated his interest in studying this least known land (the Caucasian Mountains), with its diversity of physical conditions, soils, and climate. He became a keen naturalist of that region of west Asia. Once the botanist Hryniewiecki travelled to see this strange "Czudak" naturalist living in the woods. He said that in the mountains, we should never be in a hurry. From the beginning Młokosiewicz researched the natural history of that region, setting up his home and family there, living in a truly undisturbed region for his passion.

Młokosiewicz helped sociologists on an ethnographic study of the Lezgin locals in the northern Caucasus. This "undefatigable naturalist" travelled to the Dagestan region with little scientific help. He was a good hunter and ate what his gun brought down. Famous were the scientific collecting trips of Młokosiewicz with his family. Forward went the cows, following them the helpers and

the rest of his caravan. From far expeditions he brought the natural fibers known as “ramie.” Młokosiewicz was a pioneer of faunal and floral surveys in the Caucasus region. His research eventually led to the preservation of the Lagodekhi Nature Reserve. In various seasons throughout the region he travelled much, visiting areas like the Borzowski Gorge and the coast of the Black Sea. But he became famous not for his plant cultivation or difficult journeys but his discovery of almost 60 new species for science. Plenty of insects are in his collections. He corresponded with the Varsavia (Warsaw) zoological museum for providing bird skins, including the Caucasian blackcock.

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